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Not a Manifesto

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Not A Manifesto

This is not a manifesto. This is a letter to my sister, Lynn¹, a sister writer in a small place.

Sister, they want to know why I write. How can I tell them that if I don't tell them about you too? About the us that made the writing possible, on the so many days when we thought we were crazy, couldn't be real, island gyal surviving you a crooked leg white grits gyal me a greek daughter who liked woman and sometimes man surviving in a small place that is hardly believable, in a place that didn't believe in us.

This is not a manifesto. This is words in a small place that cry at night like a baby you didn't want, couldn't take care of, forgot you had.

Remember how we said we needed a newsletter, some piece of paper with words on it, our words, to connect us to each other and other women? So we wouldn't feel alone. We were in your kitchen, sitting on the floor scheming. We were ex reporters, ex-iles from the word of our churches, ex-iles from the love of our mothers, trying to snake our ways back home, at home, still. In your kitchen.

(I dream of an infant being
raped she dies and still
no one knows
who did this to you? you ask
as I weep telling you my dream
we rescue each other in your
kitchen we open our doors
and the dreams spill out
so do the angers the fears
the memories we tell
poems and speak sermons
we could not speak anywhere
else your heresy salves
my dry scars
wets them to flower we
are sisters together in a town
where our lives are at risk
but my desires don't offend you
we talk into the night and years
about my lovers women's hands and lips
and the yearning that fills me still
you speak of your mother, your lover,
your newborn child, who is a miracle,
as you are
in this place of death
where trees and birds and lizards
are disappearing
you still dream wild gardens
and tend hummingbirds)

We schemed of words of our own. We imagined there were other island gyls scratching out weird incantations on appropriated walls, writing pads, notebooks, scraps of paper, napkins, bookmarks. We yearned for a tradition couldn't see it in the brokendown gaze of our mothers, their voices echoing the Father-Uncle-Brother-Husband-Gods/Devils warning us not to stray we did anyway found some kind of kinship courage in each other's hungriness for words for community we are still after all islandwomen find it hard to survive in isolation don't believe in separation as the lonliest path to independence that's not where we come from Sister, there are and ever will be practices older than American feminism we were looking for our own words, borrowed what we could till we could born something truer to the textures, stories, complications of our own lives So we made a book, called it WomanSpeak², found more of us than we thought existed: Asha and Marion and Aurora and Audrey, Nicolette and Dianne womanish island women who wanted to speak weave themselves into a new tradition out of everything that came before what else could we do except not speak and I had read what Audre Lorde had to say about that passed on her words to you you said Yes Yes Yes and we held readings candlelit casting old circles in new places public places conjured Alice Walker and then too looked for our own Mothers in the gardens and yards and mangrove swamps they waded through kept and swept and hardly knew at all till we could feel their hands touching ours again feel their glazed eyes opening inside us we turned our new eyes on each other wanted each other as bad as those words we were trembling for ah, and I am remembering Cherríe Moraga talking about how hard it is to love another woman when you yourself, a woman, are taught to hate womanishness, both of you unworthy

This is not a manifesto. This is testimony. This is how night came on fast in our 21 by 7 world, and we made words in between the walls of government house and the churches we grew up in, Orthodox and Anglican, between courthouses and school houses, the blue and white, green and white stripes of English school uniforms meant to keep us in line. This is how we found each other in those in between places, and every day fought to remember who we could be there. Every day the sun came up, the tide went out, and the in between places disappeared.

And so we moved into a time of separation against our wills, each of us fighting to survive at home or in the public eye wanting to love and pushing against a shame so deep sometimes we had to pull each other out of poisonous beds stranger beds beds soaked with grief or alcohol you with your addictions, me with mine once when you were drunk and we were sitting in Tamarind Hill on Village Road after dark, you said, "Maybe you and I should live together, love each other the way we're trying to love men..." You said, "Why can I tell you everything I can't say to him?" We laughed too nervously, I can still hear the ice clink against the glass, the smell of Dewar's, how you said, "Anyhow, we won't talk about this after tonight." And we never did. Girl, funny how our words seemed to disappear into cracks between night and day, always combing the beach for them after a storm, how I'd leave Nassau for Boston, New York, San Francisco, and call you crying 'cause here, in this place, I'd say, I can't find us. I forget what I know, need to be someone else. You always tell me, we're still right here. Waiting for you to come home.

This is not a manifesto. This is remembering who I write for, who I write from. How where I come from chooses the words, shapes them, needs more than one kind of sentence followed by another, more than one genre, more than one voice:

words
like whispers, gossip, sub-story
 underneath words
like prayers, hissed
 and the lines in between the lines the spaces between the words
 (what I haven't said yet the fragments that survive)
 the sentences inside brackets
 (what I'm scared to say but need to)
 the sentences outside them what I want you to see

How memoir and poetry are non-fiction and fiction is mythos and breath and tides
 are constant circular show me yuh motion is how the song goes tra la la la la and she look
 like a sugar in a plum plum plum

And the truth is, I am always leaving and coming home, forgetting and coming to, finding more ways of speaking and writing and living in both worlds, between them, at the cross currents where the words/worlds are under pressure where cool air and warm air meet up and clouds form, build, break open, transformation of air into water it's what we said so long ago, how we are changers, believing in the snake and the fire and the blood. (I am Odysseus and Calypso). Because we knew for us writing has always been a force; it was never glamorous, it was survival. It was how we came to know ourselves, stuck in our bodies (this island), rooted in them (this island), rooting inside (this island) them, inside memories and out of silences we taught ourselves to move, in between definitions imposed, in between languages, the Queen's English and Raw Bone Bahamian, Conchy Joe English and Greek Bahamian English and the way we learned to speak in front of teachers from England and tourists from North America, the word of God, the word on the street. We snaked through these, weaved a way between them, not untouched. Of course touched. Of course pining after new languages. How we would born them from our own bodies, out of the dirt, the mangrove swamp, dusty limestone track roads, the steaming hot tar roads and the jonsin' rectangular boxes of our parents' striving middle class desires. The history books that grew us. The so many gaps inside them, on every white page.

This is words in between manifestos

I will tell them, then, this is how we sustained each other, like breath, like fire, like blood. Poetry on our tongues making a way. I will tell them, this is how words in our fingers became a lifeline evenings I would call you and read my latest sermon, rant, poem and you would read me yours. I will tell them we did it because we were afraid of dying in a small place at the bottom of America, far from England, and our Caribbean sistren and brethren to the south and east. And yes, poetry was the closest thing to God. And when we grew rageful of Him, we wrote new poems, erratic ones, making long love to womanish gods then hiding the words inside yellow legal pads till again we forgot and grew withered and brittle and remembered ourselves to each other all over again. We understood then that on the ground and in our bodies seasons

come and go. You said, Sister, the wheel is turning. I said, I wish the rains would come; it is hard to grow things in this dry dirt. You said, they are coming. You said, forget what you learned up north, here the seasons are many, and indiscernible to the first world eye.

I will tell them we are writing, even though they can hardly hear us. I will tell them, Sister, when hurricane season comes, even people in big places need to be watchful.

¹Lynn Sweeting is co-founder and current editor of the journal “WomanSpeak”.

²“WomanSpeak: A Bahamian Women’s Literary Journal” brought together Bahamian women writers and spawned a small but radical writing community in the 1990s.